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EU POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

THE HAGUE 00001001 001.2 OF 002

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REF: THE HAGUE 00149

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: There are a growing number of Islamic schools in The Netherlands, but they are hardly madrassas. All are state funded, follow the national Dutch curriculum, teach in Dutch, and have largely Dutch personnel. Although the number of Islamic schools is small - 47 in the whole country - they have become one focus of the ongoing political debate over integration in the Netherlands. END SUMMARY.

NUMBER OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS SMALL BUT GROWING

¶2. (U) The number of Islamic schools in The Netherlands has slowly grown over the last few years, reaching 45 primary and two secondary schools in the 2005-2006 school year. More schools plan to open next year, including a third secondary school in The Hague. Muslims we have spoken to say many Muslim parents prefer a more conservative environment than public schools offer - some even send their children to Christian schools when Islamic schools are not available. Some students also say the Islamic schools offer a refuge from prejudice at some public schools. One female student at an Islamic secondary school in Rotterdam told us, for example, that she had been harassed in a public school for wearing a headscarf. She told us she felt more comfortable in the Islamic school.

¶3. (U) Since 1917, the Dutch Constitution has provided for government funding of religious schools. The GONL thus fully funds Islamic schools and inspects them on a regular basis. As all students in Islamic schools are required to pass national exams, these schools follow the same curriculum and use the same textbooks as their non-religious school counterparts, although regulations allow for nonnational curriculum courses, including classes on Islamic and Koranic studies, Arabic, and world religion.

MAJORITY OF MUSLIM STUDENTS NOT IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

¶4. (U) According to Said Benayad, former Chairman of the umbrella organization for Islamic schools (ISBO) and a current board member of INHOLLAND University, the 45 Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands represent about 0.6 percent of the total number of primary schools in the

country. Only 4 percent of all ethnic students attend Islamic schools. Some 85 percent of teachers at these schools are non-Muslim, while 75 percent of the principals are non-Muslim. All Islamic schools in the Netherlands are co-educational, although at least one Amsterdam school separates boys and girls in the classroom. As a comparison, Benayad noted that 70 percent of ethnic Muslim students in The Hague attend public schools, 15 percent attend Christian schools, and 15 percent attend Islamic or other schools.

FUTURE OF ISLAMIC SCHOOLS DEBATED

15. (SBU) Given the national debate on integration, the future of Islamic schools has become a focus of political and parliamentary discussion, with some questioning whether Islamic schools should continue to qualify for government funding. For those who oppose government funding of Islamic schools, the issue is how to end such funding without also ending state support of Christian schools.

16. (SBU) Another question raised in the debate is whether the existence of Islamic schools encourages separation of ethnic Muslim from native Dutch children. In a recent meeting with Emboffs, Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen asserted that Islamic schools are a positive development. He said such schools generally follow Dutch curriculum, maintain high standards, and participate fully in the educational system. He did acknowledge, however, that Amsterdam City officials probably need to pay closer attention to the operations and affiliations of a small number of Islamic schools associated with mosques with more radical messages.

17. (SBU) Some right-wing critics, such as parliamentarians Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, argue that Islamic schools do not foster integration in Dutch society. They claim that a policy of maintaining separate, segregated schools hinders interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim Dutch students. Moreover, they assert that in some Islamic schools, students are being indoctrinated into non-Western modes of thinking, which makes them prime recruiting targets for violent extremists.

18. (U) Anne-Bert Dijkstra, Dutch Education Inspectorate, recently told Emboff that regular monitoring had not found any Islamic schools to be teaching anti-Western ideas. In a 2003 review of Islamic schools, the Inspectorate did note concern that several schools were too passive in promoting social values. This has resulted in the implementation this year of expanded legislation requiring all schools to actively promote integration and good citizenship programs. Schools' efforts to promote social cohesion are now part of the Inspectorate's regular monitoring.

19. (U) In a separate exchange with Emboffs, Islamic school principals noted how some ethnic Muslim staff and principals were still adjusting to a life in the Netherlands, while simultaneously attempting to teach the same to their students. Alderman Fatima Elatik has also noted that primary schools in her district of Amsterdam have parent rooms where non-Dutch speaking parents can attend Dutch language classes, meet other parents, and learn how to become more involved in their children's education.

SEGREGATION PART OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM?

110. (U) With only 4 percent of ethnic Muslim students attending Islamic schools, it is difficult to argue that these schools are the significant cause of segregation in the Netherlands. However, many experts do view the 550 black schools in the country (which the Dutch define as having over 50 percent minority enrollment, mostly as the result of segregated neighborhoods) as contributing to defacto segregation. Such schools are mostly located in larger cities and represent about six percent of all schools in the country.

CONTINUING EMBASSY OUTREACH

¶11. (SBU) Building on contacts made at a recent luncheon, Emboffs recently visited Rotterdam's Ibn Ghaldoun, the largest Muslim high school in the Netherlands. The visit included discussions with school administrators on how to build a long-lasting relationship between the Embassy and the school, whose growing student population has resulted in plans to open a new high school in The Hague. Emboffs also shared with students and faculty donated maps, books on American history and literature, and a CD-ROM for use in the school library.

¶12. (SBU) School administrators noted with approval that the U.S. Embassy was the first foreign embassy in the country to visit the school. Students asked pointed questions about anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S., but were clearly happy with the opportunity to speak with U.S. representatives. One student questioned whether Emboffs had been afraid to visit the school given widespread anti-U.S. sentiment -- a clear sign that additional outreach is needed. As a follow-on, Ibn Ghaldoun students visited the Embassy in April. Ibn Ghaldoun's English department is also developing a proposal for follow-up activities with the Embassy.

¶13. (SBU) Emboffs have also visited the Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR), one of two privately-funded Islamic universities in the country that focus on religious training of imams and counselors. Additional visits are planned.

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